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ABSTRACT

This document, written in the first person, describes the history and feelings of a woman who was functionally illiterate as an adult but who, having learned to read, is now a student at Rancho Santiago Community College District in Orange, California. This "open letter" urges teachers to support and encourage students with similar problems, rather than talking about the seriousness of the students' problems or telling them that their education "is up to you." It states that the support and encouragement of other students is helpful, as well. The letter closes with thanks to teachers and friends who helped. (CML)

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FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

A PERSONAL VIEW OF FUNCTIONAL ILLITERACY: AN OPEN LETTER TO TEACHERS

Evelyn Monahan

Dear Teachers,

Hello, my name is Evelyn Monahan and I was functionally illiterate. I am presently enrolled in a high school diploma program at the Orange Adult Learning Center. I am here to give you a personal view on what it was like to be functionally illiterate, how it limited my life, some of the methods I used to hide it, and how Continuing Education has made a difference in my life.

I lost my education due to sickness. You see, when I was 5 months old, I was diagnosed as having cystic fibrosis. I lived with this diagnosis until I was 25 years old and came to the United States from London. The doctors at CHOC hospital retested me and said I didn't have cystic fibrosis but that I did have asthma and diabetes.

It didn't occur to people that I was illiterate because of my vocabulary which I had learned from the doctors and nurses at the hospital. When they had a moment they would sit with me and carry on a conversation. If I didn't understand a word, I would ask them to explain it to me. Sometimes volunteers would come around and read to us collectively as a group of children. I spent many years in the hospital with no form of formal education. For example, my last year in school, I spent four days out of the whole year in school. The rest of the time I was either going into the hospital or recuperating at home. When I was a child, they didn't have hospital or home tutors.

At age 15, I left school and was supported financially by the government because I was not strong enough to work. On the days I felt physically strong, I still could not have gotten a job because I could not fill out an employment application. I could write my name but not my address. I knew my address but could not spell it.

EVELYN MONAHAN is a student in the Rancho Santiago Community College District, Orange, California.

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When I made friends and they moved away, I could not write to them. I was too ashamed to tell them I couldn't write so I lost alot of friends this way.

I had to have someone with me every time I needed to fill out forms for doctors, dentists, etc.

I got married in 1980 and my husband was shocked at my illiteracy. I hid it so well. He had to be with me most of the time, especially when I was applying for immigration. This was particularly hard on him since he has a masters degree and is at present sitting for his Ph.D. But he had a wife who could only write her name.

I would try not to be alone when I had to go shopping, to the doctor, to the bank, etc., but if I was alone, I learned to bluff my way through things. For example, at the bank I would start to look through my bag and tell the clerk I didn't have my glasses, even before I had to wear glasses. I would ask them to fill out the check and then I would sign it. Sometimes I wouldn't even bother to go.

I couldn't go to eat at a restaurant by myself because I couldn't read a menu. When I was with someone, I would start a conversation and ask them what they were having; they would tell me and then I would say "that sounds good, I'll have that too." This also added to my sickness because I would eat things that were bad for my asthma and diabetes.

Being illiterate limited me in many other areas. I had no use for a library. I didn't listen to the news because it scared me because I didn't understand what was going on. I wasn't able to vote because I didn't understand the issues or distinguish important matters that could affect my life or the nation.

I could not correspond with people. My use of T.V. was limited as I didn't like regular programming and at the same time, I didn't understand quality T.V. like Channel 28, 50, etc. I did not understand classical music; I had not use for museums. My conversation with people was limited through lack of interesting material. One can only say so much about cooking and knitting. Not that these things are bad, but now I'm able to talk about other things which give me more balance and interest in my life.

I should tell you that when I entered school in November 1984, I was evaluated at a third grade math and fourth grade reading. I started with a program called ABE, Adult Basic Education. Nancy Brooks was my teacher and within seven months, I was reading at the eighth grade level. On June 13, 1985, I entered high school with 0 credits. It seemed like an impossible task to get 160 credits

for graduation. I'm coming along slowly, but surely and now have somewhere between 90-100 credits. Some progress is better than no progress. Math and spelling are my weakest subjects. Reading and comprehension are my strongest subjects. There are two things I've found useful: hang in there no matter what, and make the dictionary my friend.

It's wonderful to be able to read. You miss so much in life by not being able to. I'm a member of the Santa Ana Library and I use it a lot. I can read some of my husband's books that he uses for his Ph.D. work.

I can fill out my own applications, write my own checks and read menus. I can write letters now that people can read. Three years ago my letters started "Dear Mum" and ended "Love, Eve." You couldn't read the middle because the writing was so bad, the spelling was atrocious and there was not sentence structure or punctuation whatsoever.

My teacher, Mr. Tomlinson, said in the two years he's known me, he's seen a big improvement in my English skills, but he says the biggest improvement is in my emotional liberation and independence. I'm much more confident now in all areas of my life.

Last year, I completed an ROP training course as a nurse's aide. I not only completed the nurse's aide course, but I was one of six students out of a class of 35 who were given an extra certificate for passing with "A" grades. I don't mean to sound bold, but I did want to let you know that with a lot of effort on my part, I was able to get good grades.

I got a job in a hospital but had to leave for health reasons. I'm glad to have been able to take the course. It helped me with my self-esteem.

I learned to drive and got my license. This helped too, toward my independence. I now can read maps and find my own way around. I used to travel on the subway in England. But I could not take simple directions, such as, take Victoria Line to the District Line and get off at South Kensington. I'd have to be told to take the blue line five stops, the green or yellow line two stops and get off.

I have something important to say about encouraging students. I was very timid and tried to start school twice before. The first teacher had me stand up in front of the class and told me I was the worst student he'd ever seen. The second teacher told me that if I wanted the education, it was up to me. I felt I was interfering with his coffee break. Needless to say, I didn't go to school again until I

met Nancy who encouraged me.

I personally needed a lot of encouragement. I felt awful inside. I didn't need others to tell or remind me. It was very frustrating for me as I was told I was intelligent and my vocabulary was excellent. But, *I could not* communicate in any other form...especially about my feelings. I urge you to encourage students you come in contact with, in any way you can. I talked with other students who encouraged me when things were difficult. Likewise, I returned the favor. Teachers don't have to give all the encouragement. It can come from co-students.

I was fortunate enough that my husband encouraged me in regards to my education. In my own family, education was not encouraged. It was not a necessity like food and rent. Nowadays my family encourages me to continue with my education.

I'd like to give special thanks to my teachers and personal friends who so freely gave of their time to me. My husband has a saying..."If you give a man a fish, you can feed him for one meal, but if you teach him how to fish, he can eat for a lifetime."

Thank you.

Love,
Eve